# WHAT DOES THE NATURE OF LITERATURE REQUIRE OF ITS INTERPRETERS?

QC 677N

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UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS

*As a Supplement to*
*THE CEA CRITIC*

*(For guidance and cooperation in providing this supplement to THE CEA CRITIC, thanks are due Professor Arthur Musgrave (Director of Publications), Messrs. Donald P. Allan (Secretary, Extension Service) and Radie H. Bunn (Editorial Office, Extension Service) of the University of Massachusetts.*

*(For gratifying support of the Spring, 1949, Conference of the New England College English Association, thanks are due Dr. Ralph Van Meter, President of the University of Massachusetts and Professor Frank Prentice Rand, Dean of the School of Liberal Arts at the same institution).*

*LATELY*, I dreamed a dream which may seem to you[1] too trivial to relate, but which in my opinion illustrates the complex and mysterious nature of literature. I was standing in a garden, on a very green lawn, at the foot of which extended, without any fence separating the two, another lawn and garden. Near the border, which was marked by a single post some five feet high, I beheld a grandmotherly person holding in her lap a baby with the bluest eyes I ever saw. Beside them two other children were playing, who seemed to be six or eight years old. Everything was bathed in sunshine, and all the shapes and colors and motions and countenances and voices, and the words they spoke, were beautifully distinct and clear, far more so than in the ordinary scenes of life, – everything being more intensely real and more challenging to my attention and responses.

Suddenly one of the children exclaimed: "Something is buzzing!," and I likewise heard it.

Then I looked, and beheld on the post what resembled a bee in shape and colors. The children rushed toward it, and I felt intense fear lest they or the baby might be stung. I cried aloud to stop them, but then I suddenly saw something that never before had I seen or even heard of. The bee, apparently excited, suddenly put forth from its small body two long transparent streamers, like a forked tail, many times its own length, — a lovely wave-like transparence with rainbow colors, each streamer set at a regular interval with pairs of gossamer wings, in gentle motion, — the whole apparition more wondrously beautiful in shape and color and life than anything of the kind I had ever beheld, so that I could not help exclaiming, "How wondrous are thy works, O Creator and Lord!"

The children, delighted by this marvel, dashed toward it. Instantly I moved forward to protect them and I cried out, "Don't touch it; it may be poisonous!" Instantly the bee darted away, leaving its streamers broken behind it. For a moment they remained floating in the air; then their colors quickly faded, and they vanished into nothingness; and I heard a sigh of surprise and regret from us all, as we stood there gazing and wondering.

I seemed to awake, but it was into a second phase of the dream. I was in a great library; and here too everything, and its significance, were as vivid and intense, both without me and within, as it had been in the garden. I was restlessly seeking in books of natural history for a description of such an extraordinary phenomenon as I had seen. I was leafing eagerly through great piles of books heaped disorderly on a large table. I sensed that I had been doing this for hours in vain, when suddenly I came upon a passage in the quaint eccentric Charles Waterton's *Wanderings in South America* (1825), a passage which I had never read before, but wherein he told of

1. This address was originally delivered before the New England College English Association at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, May 7, 1949.

seeing precisely what I had seen, — the bee, the streamers, the colors, and all the rest.

The edition that I read in my dream was an annotated edition (Alas, there is none such in reality!) and on this passage was a footnote which began: "This amazing entomological phenomenon has not been described by any other tropical explorer, or any other naturalist; but, for the following reasons, there is a possibility that its actuality may yet be verified. . ." And then, just as I was avidly pressing onward to learn those reasons, the footnote seemed to expand into greater length until it overflowed the margins of the volume, which itself was growing huger and huger into an elephant-folio like Audubon's till it crushed me with its monstrous weight, and I awoke — still ignorant of whether such an insect could exist — still uncertain where fantasy began and where reality ended.

A poor sort of dream, I confess, yet mine own, to me unforgettable, and — if I mistake not — weaving together, by mere chance perhaps, some of the essential strands in the complex which we call literature. There is the extraordinary intensity and vividness of the perceptual and emotional experience; there is personal interest, the sympathy with the children, the ethical, if you like to call it so, in the protectiveness; there is a touch of the religious in the sense of a supernatural creation behind the strange phenomenon; and in the second phase of the dream there is the recognition of the intellectual and scientific curiosity involved and aroused. Finally, and to me most significant of all, there is the suggestion of the freely imagining mind reaching forward toward images that may not be so fantastic as they seem at first, that may indeed truly represent realities that are merely unfamiliar or that may yet be realized.

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The problem, what is the nature of literature, has just been brought into sharp focus by Professors Wellek's and Warren's book, *Theory of Literature*. I admire many of its conclusions and tendencies, especially its insistence that the teacher of literature should be a literary man, that he should have "experienced and valued literature as an art." I applaud the attacks on mere antiquarianism, the plea that Professors of English should be Professors of Literature, and should have a knowledge and appreciation of literature in foreign languages as well as in their own, also that aesthetic criteria should be drawn from more than one literature. Their work is valuable in clarifying one's ideas about literature and its interpretation in those parts of the whole subject to which most attention has been given in recent decades by historians, theorists, and critics. In some of the chapters, to which selective reading lists are appended, arguments in many

articles and books are skilfully and judiciously digested. Those aspects of the general subject to which much attention has been given in our time are learnedly and clearly summarized.

On the other hand I confess that I am somewhat disappointed and repelled by other features and attitudes in this treatise, — particularly with Professor Warren's contributions thereto. The authors rightly insist that literature is an art, and should be studied as an art; but they seem to me to be either vague or mistaken as to the nature of art, its specific qualities, and its historic functions. They do not seem to me to have made clear what the great achievements and effects of literature have been. They insist that its study should not be submerged by literary biography, by sociology, by economics, by psychology, or by the history of ideas; they make a declaration of its independence which I enthusiastically applaud. But when they come to the point where they ought to characterize the nature of this independent art, they seem to me to dissolve into vagueness. They seem to me to recognize sympathetically only *two* characteristics of literature, — first, that it is an art in the Kantian sense, that its approach to its object is wholly disinterested and free, having no personal, political, or economic prejudices (which of course is true of the best art) and secondly, that (what is equally true) its means of expression, its formal traits, must be appropriate in the fullest degree. Hence many chapters are devoted to the most frequently used varieties of techniques, devices, and styles, — as in recent criticism has been fashionable. All of this is very helpful indeed, and I object to none of it in itself.

But in my opinion it misses, or shies away from an outspoken statement of why the literary art is of the very highest human importance. It seems to me to deny that the aesthetic experience has any extraordinary and independent value at all, to deny that there is any "ultimate irreducible aesthetic value." It implies that the quality and substance of literature can be *in its entirety* translated into intellectual terms; and that the total history of literature can ultimately be set forth in a coherent history or systematic explanation which shall be strictly rationalistic. Professor Warren's chapter on "The Function of Literature" seems to me to evade in a "Yes - but," "Some say this, and some say that," manner the central question of all, — namely, has literature any unique nature and function, and how has that uniqueness been manifested in the past and today?

It is noticeable and significant that Wellek and Warren recoil from the belief that down the ages literature has revealed to mankind truths which sometimes have been of profounder and more potent value than those which science and philosophy

have excogitated. They shrink away from the faith that literature may have prophetic authority. Hence they deprecate the kind of criticism, which some decades ago flourished in Germany, and which sought to discover in literary works their *Geist*, their spiritual intimations and effects. Professor Warren considers such claims "grandiose." I, on the contrary, maintain that the evidence of history, and the highest qualities of the greatest masterpieces, prove them not "grandiose," but true.

To crush such enthusiasm, Professor Warren intimates that those possessed by it go so far as to believe that "in its ideal form, literature includes all that is best in religion, philosophy, economics, or art. To embarrass an opponent's sound case by exaggerating its assertions is not, however, to refute it.

We who believe that art and literature have given mankind insights and truths and wisdom and motivations derived from no other source do not falsely assert that science and rationalistic philosophy and economics and sociology do not also have their kinds of truth to find and communicate. What we do assert is that their truths, without ours, are incomplete, perilously inadequate for civilized human progress, and lacking in the powerful motivations which only the imaginative arts can inspire. We are enthusiastic believers in our subject, not only because literature has been the most inspiring force in our personal lives, not only because we love it, but also because we know that it has been the most important force toward the civilization of mankind from the beginning of time. The facts and reasons supporting that belief I tried to set forth in my address before the Modern Language Association at Detroit in 1947. They are accessible in its *Publications* (lxii, 1197), and I shall therefore not dwell upon them here.

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To explain my own philosophy of literature it is, I regret to say, necessary for me to indulge in some personal reminiscences. I derived it, not from my formal education (in point of fact, before I found myself it was necessary for me to reject and discard everything that I had been taught by Kittredge, Babbitt, Baker, and other Harvard notabilities). It was a great shock to me to realize that I had become a so-called professor of literature, had drifted into the profession because from my childhood I loved nothing so much as reading poetry, fiction, and literary criticism, without my really knowing what literature essentially was nor why I had devoted my life in interpreting it.

I thereupon tried to discover just what it was that I was trying to understand and interpret. And whatever errors there

may be in the conclusions I finally and painfully arrived at, I must plead in their favor that they were not drawn from any ready-made school or dogmatic theory of literature, but derived from my own individual, however incompetent, study of the two literary fields which I was engaged in teaching for about twenty-five years, — namely, the masterpieces of the Romantic Movement, English and European, and the masterpieces of prose-fiction from their earliest rise in world-folklore to the nineteenth century.

My approach throughout was that, not of English literature, but of world-literature. Among the few qualifications that I had was, owing to my childhood years in Europe, an appreciation of good style in several languages, not in English only. And my main problem was to try to discover what were the persistently characteristic traits in works of literature as superficially and obviously different as the early folk-myths, the Bibles of the great religions, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Montaigne, Moliere, Goethe, Wordsworth, Balzac, Keats, and Tolstoi. I may not have found the common denominator; but I do not believe any theory of literature is worthy of serious consideration which does not include varieties of the best literature as diverse as those.

The basic point in the convictions I arrived at is that any sound concept of literature must be in harmony with a general philosophy of the universe and with some kind of religious faith. An interpreter of literature who has no theory of knowledge, no epistemology, seems to me unaware of what he is doing. What humanity values and seeks is some kind of insight into the world in which it has to live. If literature does not contribute something of that kind, it is not to mankind of primary value. What I maintain is that it does contribute that insight, makes that contribution to the sum of knowledge, and is therefore of essential and needed value. Men are unhappy, anxious, fearful, because they do not know and feel some of the most important qualities of their universe and therefore cannot live happily in their world. Great literature offers them that knowledge, and thereby some degree of courage.

The rivals of literature are the so-called social sciences, — economics and various "ologies," pretentiously rationalistic, scientific, or mathematical thought-structures, which more or less accurately weigh, measure, and map discernible features of the world, but always miss the portraiture of man in his completeness, and on the level of his highest and truest existence. The fullness of man's real life transcends the factually and statistically ascertainable, and the logically therefrom deducible; and can be represented only by art and literature. And man can grapple with the ultimate problems of his existence only through the kinds of truth that art and

literature give him.

We are complex creatures. We need to survive (or think we do) physically and practically and politically, and of course the various scientific knowledges and social sciences are necessary to that end; but they help us no further. Our greatest needs toward intellectual and spiritual fulfillment are satisfied only by art and literature.

Great literature, beginning with the great world-myths and the scriptures of the world-religions, arose out of the emotional and imaginative experiences and gropings of man. It is the manifestation and expression of his increasing insights into his growing potentialities and changing relationships toward deity, nature, and mankind. It manifests, in my opinion, an unsteady but not unreal advance through free and individual effort of intellect, imagination, and soul toward a truer and higher perception of what those relationships should be. Its great historic role is to be at once *illumination* of what should be, and *incentive* to attain thereto.

Great literature has its roots, its sources of nourishment, from its aboriginal beginnings to contemporary times, in everlasting principles of individual and social life; and it is a necessary means of the revelation of those basic principles. Underlying the confusion, ugliness, and cruelty of life, it has gradually suggested the presence of tendencies toward justice and benevolence, toward individual freedom and responsibility. As Goethe said, man is at the same time the heir of nature and a free citizen of a free world. From the prehistoric days of the earliest myths and epics to the days of Mann, Shaw, and Gide, all great literature, whether it struggled to express the actual or the possible, has assumed that the attainable goal of human nature and human society was what imagination and faith intuited, — namely, its ultimate fulfillment in peace, love, self-sacrifice, and happiness. While sharply satirizing and condemning life as it is and has been, it has never ceased to witness that life should be and can be governed and directed by ethical ideas, imaginative sympathy, and humane feelings, —any other governance, political or economic, being an offense against real human nature and the predominant character of the universe.

The ultimate sovereignty of the universe, as imaginative literature from its beginnings has intuited it, is a sovereignty of justice and of love. The standards by which its realistic literature has condemned society, and those by which its romantic literature has envisaged a better and nobler world, have constantly been those of humane goodwill. The spirit of world-literature down the ages has been a progressive civilizing spirit of love and hopefulness; its greatest works are the inspired scriptures of humanity, the memorials of its past efforts, the witnesses of its present struggles, and the

prophecies of its future consummation. And the ground has always been imaginative insight and vision.

This is not to deny that the great works of literature are influenced by, and partly the outgrowth of rationally excogitated theories; but they are so only in part, and it is their literary and artistic qualities, — the part of them that cannot be reduced to rational explication, — the inspired and beautiful qualities of them that cannot be logically derived from ascertainable antecedents, — their emotionally compelling, their metaphorical, symbolical, mythical, magical qualities which constitute and express their most important characteristics, and produce their real human influence.

The farther you range in literature, the surer you will feel that such are its real nature and development. Begin with Aesop or Homer or the folklore of the Egyptians, end with Shaw and Joyce, you will find that the more it changes on the surface, the more persistently it moves in the same direction. It is always, and more than any other attempts at explication, the expression of the keenest percipience of life in its complete nature, past, present, and future, as it disgustingly is and as it nobly might be. It is always either a chastening exposure of the less desirable characteristics of man, and of his mistaken attempts to understand Nature and God; or a helpful encouragement of his endeavors to climb toward nobler heights of understanding and comradeship. It culminates in suggestions of durable satisfactions in temporal civilization, and an intimation of eternal immortality.

The touch of creative imagination is felt in every work of genuine art and literature, whether it be picture, sculpture, poetry, drama, epic, prose fiction, essay, history, literary work of any kind, by those who themselves are endowed with imagination, and by them alone. Deep answers to deep; otherwise there is silence. This is not to deny that inasmuch as literary works include many non-literary or non-imaginative elements, its best interpreters must possess many different interests and abilities. Nearly everything they know and appreciate about non-literary and non-aesthetic qualities will sooner or later be of service to them and their readers. But the particularly literary and artistic qualities of what they try to interpret should be to them always the most important, — the kinds and qualities of truth which literature expresses and the means by which it expresses those truths. Those truths, or intimations, or hints, cannot be fully interpreted in prosaically factual narrative, propositions, or arguments, or in language which is devoid of the beauty of style and the emotional effects which the masterpieces themselves emanate.

Literary history, literary criticism, literary explication in the classroom must be in harmony with the subject it is

trying to interpret. Perhaps it is defensible that a Professor of Sociology at Vassar writes in a treatise entitled *The Family and Democratic Society* a sentence such as the following (though I do not see how it can be defended):

> "Mate selection involves a competitive interaction process similar to that found in the operation of other markets, exchanges and clearing houses."

Perhaps this loathsome mumbo jumbery expresses that special kind of truth that emerges from sociological argumentation. But it should be anathema in the study and criticism of literature; and those who seek insights into profounder and nobler truths about the family and democratic society will, I believe, prefer to such a theoretic disquisition, both with respect to style and substance, Tolstoi's *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*.

Likewise objectionable, if my concept of literature is sound, is the encouragement of mere antiquarianism, that is the tacit and stupid assumption that because a piece of writing is old it is therefore of literary importance. This leads to the indiscriminate recognition of trash that ought to be forgotten, but that is taken seriously because it was concocted long years ago, — the assumption which makes a laborious learned volume like Professor Baugh's recent *History of English Literature* for hundreds of pages so non-literary a performance, and so irrelevant to its alleged main purpose.

During thirty years of teaching graduate students I have steadfastly refused to allow a young scholar to devote the last year of his graduate study, which ought to be the most inspiring to him, to research on third-rate authors or non-literary topics. Indiscriminate antiquarianism, requiring no literary taste or judgement, is the comfortable refuge of the essentially unliterary dullard. The extreme opposite, however, seems to me almost as bad, — namely, the cheap contemporaneousness which assumes that a serious literary study may be made of some up-to-date writer who has the new look and is temporarily in fashion, though he may look like an outmoded slattern a few years hence, and though it is not at all clear that his work is genuine literature at all.

To turn from what the interpreter should not be to what ideally he ought to be, it seems to me that the nature of literature requires that he possess individual personality, imagination, and style. Above all he must have a sincere faith in the value — past, present, and future — of creative imagination for the individual and for mankind. He must have no doubt in his mind that the greatest works of literature are not merely decorative playthings but beautiful revelations of positive and important truths about Man, Nature, and God, not revealed or revealable through any other medium. I do not contend that he must necessarily be a man of religious piety and adherent of any formal religious faith. But I feel cer-

tain that a sound interpreter of great literature must have a responsive imaginative sympathy with some of the forms of religious faith, not necessarily in the sense of adhering to a particular ecclesiastical affiliation (for the organized churches have often proved to be enemies of true religion) but in the sense of having a deep apprehension that there is a supernatural and inspiring presence in the Universe, in Nature, and in Man himself, something in which the fears and anxieties and restlessness of Man's soul may find, if not repose, at least fortitude, something which suggests the ultimately sovereign presence of eternal laws, eternal values, eternal compassion, and eternal companionship.

The interpreter of literature must also be historically minded, but with a difference from the historian of political, economic, or strictly intellectual history, with a difference from the historian of merely physical power or merely logical inferences. The literary historian tries to be the recorder and interpreter of Imagination and its beautiful works, — the historian of an inspirational wind which bloweth when and where it listeth, which has demonstrably served and guided the progress of mankind towards humane civilization, but which has not proceeded by logically explicable means or steps. His historical mindedness is his recognition of the persistence in human history of one and the same goal, combined with a perplexed percipience that the steps toward that goal have often been surprising, unpredictable, and inexplicable.

Imagination has always been man's chief guide in the onward quest, but it has impelled him not by rationalistically chartable steps, but by leaps and bounds from a dark and murky center outwards now in one direction, now in another, toward a radiance of eternal light and truth. In other words, the historical sense of the man of letters must be grounded in a faith that man is a free questing spirit in an unpredictable yet coherent universe. The historical reconciliation of great authors as diverse as, say Virgil, Rabelais, Goethe, and Tolstoi, on any other basis than this imaginative, or, if you prefer, mystical, one, seems to me to be a vain attempt. But on the imaginative and mystical level it seems to me that their tendencies and values unite in a harmony of beauty and of truth.

These beliefs of mine, arising slowly during several decades of study of world-literature, received in my opinion amazing confirmation a few weeks ago through the publication of Professor Christopher R. North's erudite work, *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah* (Oxford University Press). It is one of our oldest myths, composed in its present form some 2700 years ago, preserved only in fragments scattered through the latter part of the Book of Isaiah, this unforgettable story and characterization of a kind of hero who paradoxical-

ly was not to be bold and imposing and domineering, causing his voice to be heard in the streets, but an inspired servant of God who was to be despised and rejected of men, wounded for their transgressions, and bruised for their iniquities, pouring out his soul for their salvation even unto his undeserved and ignominious death.

The power of this beautiful and appealing myth over the human mind has been nothing short of marvelous; and its origin, hidden in mystery, has been debated for centuries. It has been falsely interpreted in nearly every possible way, — first, as a literal forecast of the life of Christ; secondly, as a characterization of the Jewish people collectively, and thirdly, as a sketch of some historical person, Josiah, Jeremiah, and about fifteen others — all impossible.

The learned research and incisive arguments of Professor North conclusively demonstrate that the myth of the Suffering Servant of God was a work of creative imagination, the expression of *new* ideals conceived in a prophetic mind, ideals of a higher and more humane kind of heroism and service. Once its author had so beautifully expressed this ideal, it took on, as great literary creations so often do, a life and potency of its own. In the fullness of time, Isaiah's imaginary humble hero made a deep impression on the mind of Jesus, and helped to guide his own life.

As the Swedish scholar, H. S. Nyberg, says, "What was conceived in the words and thought forms of myth was taken up into a living man, in whom it takes on personality (manhood) and becomes a reality in and through him." Its life and influence were moreover indefinitely extended through the fact that the Church used it, in its Christological teachings, as a clue to the profoundest depths of the character of Jesus and to his chief motivations. And since the character and ethics of Christ are admittedly the highest ideals of Western civilization, we have in this myth and its history a supreme example of the power of creative imagination, — first in discerning higher potentialities of human nature, and then in fostering their approximation. I might add that, even in a matter of secondary importance, the history of this myth illumines literary experience. Though Jesus made it clear that he loved the idea of a *suffering* savior, it was, like so many venturesome gropings forward and upward, either unintelligible or unappealing to his disciples; during his lifetime they rejected it or ignored it; and they did not recognize its glory until the paradox of his death, — at once an ignominy and a triumph, — had awakened their own imagination from its sleep. Such is the revolutionary character of imagination that the appreciation of its boldest creations is nearly always retarded by the pathetically conventional nature of the ordinary mind.

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